



**BILL NUMBER:** HB 1586

**TITLE:** Protective Orders - Coercive Control

**COMMITTEE:** Judiciary

**HEARING DATE:** 3/13/2026

**POSITION:** UNF

TurnAround, Inc. is the designated rape crisis center for Baltimore City and Baltimore County and a comprehensive domestic violence service provider. Core components of the agency’s work include crisis response, survivor-centered advocacy, legal referrals, trauma-informed therapy, and community education. TurnAround also serves as the Regional Navigator for Baltimore County and Howard County, providing specialized services to survivors of human trafficking. The organization is a member of the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA), the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence (MNADV), and the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force (MDHTTF).

HB 1586 would add “coercive control” to the definition of “abuse” in Family Law §4-501, thereby allowing a protective order to be issued – and the full range of extraordinary relief granted – based solely on a finding of coercive control when the person seeking relief is an adult. The bill defines coercive control as a “pattern of emotional or psychological manipulation, maltreatment, threat of force, or intimidation used to compel an individual to act, or refrain from acting, against the individual’s will,” and lists examples such as isolation, monitoring, financial control, threats related to immigration, and interference with reproductive autonomy. While these behaviors are indeed common dynamics in abusive relationships, the way HB 1586 codifies them raises serious concerns about implementation, proof, and the risk of unintended harm to survivors.

Protective orders are an emergency remedy designed for situations involving actual violence or an imminent threat of serious harm. Because they are issued quickly and often with limited evidence at the interim and temporary stages, they carry unusually broad and intrusive relief: removal from the home, stay-away and no-contact provisions, temporary custody and visitation, and emergency financial support. Expanding the underlying definition of “abuse” to include a broad, highly contextual concept like coercive control greatly enlarges the pool of people who may seek this powerful relief, including situations that are better addressed through other civil remedies, criminal statutes, or supportive services rather than emergency protection orders. In practice, this risks diluting the protective order remedy and making judges more skeptical of petitioners overall, including those facing clear and immediate danger.

Coercive control is, by definition, complex and context-dependent. Behaviors that may be deeply harmful in one relationship can look similar to everyday conflict, poor communication, or even mutual dysfunction in another. Many survivors also have difficulty naming, organizing, and documenting coercive control – especially under trauma, time pressure, or without counsel. At the same time, abusers who are more resourced, articulate, or legally savvy may be better positioned to frame themselves as the true “victim” and present a more coherent narrative to the court. National experts, including the Battered Women’s Justice Project, have warned that codifying coercive control in protection order statutes often leads to inconsistent application, overreliance on surface behaviors without understanding context, and a tendency for courts to grant orders only in the most extreme cases. This has the perverse effect of normalizing less obvious but still dangerous patterns of coercive control and minimizing survivors’ lived experiences.

We are particularly concerned that HB 1586 will make it easier for abusers to weaponize the protective order system against survivors. Increasingly, advocates see mutual or cross-petitions where abusers claim they—not the survivor—are being “controlled” or “manipulated.” Because coercive control is largely invisible and hard to document, courts may rely on superficial cues like who appears calmer or has counsel, which disadvantages survivors who are traumatized, disabled, limited English proficient, or navigating poverty. Adding a broad, ambiguous category of “coercive control” to the statute will likely increase cross-filings and mutual orders, further entrapping survivors in systems meant to protect them.

HB 1586 also raises serious equity concerns. Vague, discretionary standards in family and criminal law fall hardest on Black survivors, survivors of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+ survivors, and survivors with mental health or substance use histories, who are already more likely to be misidentified as abusers. Adding a broad, subjective concept like coercive control without clear limits or safeguards risks deepening these disparities and making it easier for abusers to reframe survivors’ resistance as “controlling” behavior, particularly in high-conflict custody cases.

Maryland’s current protective order statute already covers a wide range of dangerous conduct, including serious bodily harm, threats of imminent serious bodily harm, assault, sexual offenses and attempts, false imprisonment, stalking, and nonconsensual pornography. Many coercive control cases also involve one or more of these behaviors and can already qualify for relief. Rather than expanding the definition of abuse, the more effective solution is to improve training, practice, and accountability—through judicial education, better access to counsel and advocates, and tools to address legal systems abuse—so that existing law is applied more consistently and safely.

We agree that abuse often includes nonphysical tactics such as isolation, surveillance, reproductive coercion, and economic control, and research shows these patterns are both common and linked to severe and lethal violence. Survivors tell us that these psychological and economic harms are among the most devastating. Our concern is that HB 1586 may give survivors false assurance that

the system will fully recognize coercive control, while in practice courts may apply the statute unevenly, deny petitions that do not match narrow expectations, or even use it against survivors—ultimately eroding trust and discouraging people from seeking help.

If the General Assembly wishes to address coercive control in a way that truly benefits survivors, we encourage alternative approaches. Rather than expanding the definition of “abuse,” the legislature could direct courts to consider evidence of coercive control in cases that already meet the current standard and support the use of expert testimony or trained advocates to explain these dynamics. Investments in judicial education, bench cards, and practice guidance would help courts apply existing law more effectively, without creating a new, broadly defined category of abuse that is especially vulnerable to weaponization.

TurnAround appreciates the intent behind HB 1586 and shares the goal of ensuring that Maryland law reflects the realities of modern domestic violence. However, codifying coercive control as a standalone basis for a protective order, as this bill proposes, is more likely to produce inconsistent outcomes, deepen existing inequities, and expose survivors to greater risk of legal systems abuse.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge the Committee to issue an unfavorable report on HB 1586.

For further inquiries, please contact Amanda Rodriguez, Esq., Chief Executive Officer, at [arodriguez@turnaroundinc.org](mailto:arodriguez@turnaroundinc.org).

Sources:

1. Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence; Battered Women’s Justice Project. Reports and policy briefs on codifying coercive control in civil protection order statutes and associated risks of inconsistent application and weaponization.
2. Office of the Federal Ombudsperson for Victims of Crime (Canada); Women’s Law. Research and guidance on the nature, prevalence, and impacts of coercive control and nonphysical abuse in intimate partner violence.
3. Canadian Women’s Foundation; Incredible Women Project. Analyses of inequities, legal systems abuse, and disproportionate impacts of vague legal standards on marginalized survivors, including Black, immigrant, LGBTQ+, and criminalized survivors.